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SUBJECT: MAYSAN PROVINCE: AVIAN INFLUENZA, FLOODING AND AGRICULTURAL
SECTOR WORKING GROUP

REF: (A) BASRAH 006 (B) BAGHDAD 254 (C) BAGHDAD 400

¶1. Summary: Information from the Danish Embassy Office and the UN indicates that there are confirmed cases of H5N1 in birds in Maysan province. There is currently no evidence that it has affected humans, but there are six suspicious cases (including one death) still awaiting test results. Recent flooding in the province has been brought under control, and the Maysan Agricultural Sector Working Group held its first meeting on February 18. End Summary.

AVIAN INFLUENZA

¶2. On February 18, the Agricultural Advisor (AgAd) from the Danish Embassy Office in Basrah attended the Agricultural Sector Working Group meeting at Camp Abu Naji in Maysan province. The AgAd was unable to discuss the recent outbreak of avian influenza (AI) in detail with his Iraqi counterparts but did broach the issue with a British sergeant at Abu Naji. The AgAd told poloff that there were confirmed cases of the H5N1 strain in Maysan in birds. He cited the case of two domesticated pigeons that had the disease and confirmed that their owner that has died. The information he received indicated that the owner of the birds did not die from AI.

¶3. The AgAd told poloff that information was circulating that Baghdad has provided a US\$20 million compensation scheme for farmers who must kill their birds. He said that the local government would pay US\$3 per chicken and US\$1.50 per pigeon brought to the veterinary clinic to be disposed of. The AgAd told poloff that he was worried about the way the compensation scheme would be carried out. He said that once people found out about the monetary compensation, killing birds and bringing them to the veterinary clinic would be seen by some as a business venture or opportunity. And the reward plan to bring dead and possibly infected birds to the veterinary clinic would increase the spread of contamination. The AgAd was told that the residents in the province were panicking about the discovery of H5N1, but the local government was working to take control of the situation and ease fears.

¶4. On February 19, poloff spoke with the UN Coordinator who met with local staff of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Basrah regarding the WHO visit to Maysan province on February 16. The UN Coordinator said that there has been one suspicious death (the owner of the domesticated pigeons mentioned above), and there are currently five suspicious cases. All cases are awaiting results from blood tests. Therefore, there is currently no evidence of H5N1 in humans in Maysan although results of the tests are still pending. If the tests come back positive it will add to the growing concern in Iraq regarding AI (See Refs). The UN representative said that WHO would provide training in all four southern provinces to medical, laboratory and veterinary staff regarding AI and how to handle cases. WHO will also provide masks, suits, boots and Tamiflu to the four

provinces.

FLOODING

15. The Danish AgAd was told that the flooding that occurred in the southern part of Maysan and northern part of Basrah in the past two weeks has been brought under control. The majority of the flooding occurred in the marsh areas of the two provinces. The Maysan Provincial Council has been tied up in crisis management of the AI outbreak and flooding for the past two weeks. The Maysan PRDC, scheduled for February 16, was cancelled so that the local government could focus its attention on these matters.

AGRICULTURAL SECTOR WORKING GROUP

16. The purpose of the Danish AgAd's visit to Maysan was to attend the first Agricultural Sector Working Group meeting for the province. The AgAd had been in constant contact with the Director of Agriculture (DA) in Maysan for a week before the trip. Despite the boycott against the Danish Government in Basrah province, the DA told the AgAd that he would only attend the meeting if the AgAd were there. The AgAd said there was no mention of the cartoon controversy during the meeting.

17. The AgAd said that it was a good first meeting, but there was some frustration on his part and the part of his British counterparts who work with him and accompanied him to the meeting from Basrah. He said that the Basrah donor representatives and the donor representatives based in Maysan were not giving the same message to the Iraqis regarding how they should outline a strategy for project funding. He said they worked through it during the meeting and believes the issue has been resolved. The Agricultural Sector Working Group agreed to a second meeting in three to four weeks.

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COMMENT

18. Comment: The government of Maysan Province is much more professional than its counterpart in Basrah. Though the Brits and Danes are considered off limits by almost all the Basrah governmental entities, the Maysan government recognized the expertise of the Danish AgAd and resolved to work with him even with the cartoon controversy still raging in southern Iraq. A matter-of-fact businesslike attitude combined with the uncertainty over AI caused the Maysan government to ignore possible short-term political gain that could be made by playing the cartoon card.

19. Comment continued: The inability for poloffs to travel outside of Basrah has made it increasingly difficult to assess the situation on the ground in each of the other three provinces. Poloff attempted to join the Danish AgAd on his trip to Maysan but was unable to do so because of limited British helicopter capabilities. Poloffs have been unable to attend recent PRDC meetings in other provinces due to British restrictions on the number of people that can travel to the meetings. Poloffs must rely on information from counterparts such as the Danish AgAd and others who are in the provinces or have the ability to travel for information regarding Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces. End Comment.

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